

**AMENDMENTS TO THE SPECIFICATION**

Paragraph [0012] of the electronically filed specification is amended to read as follows:

[0012] Disclosed herein is an improved process sequence of fabricating magnetic random access memory (MRAM) devices wherein, among other aspects, a metal hardmask is formed over a plurality of magnetic tunnel junction (MTJ) stacks thereby providing a self-aligned contact between the stacks and subsequent upper metallization lines formed thereupon. In other words, the hardmask (being self aligned between the MTJ stacks and the upper metallization lines) serves as an electrical contact therebetween. The metal hardmask also serves as an etch stop layer for subsequent dual damascene processing steps used in the formation of the upper metallization lines and vias connecting the upper metallization lines to lower metallization lines (on which the MTJ stacks are formed).